

TRIMNELL FAMILY AND CANTERBURY CLOCKS

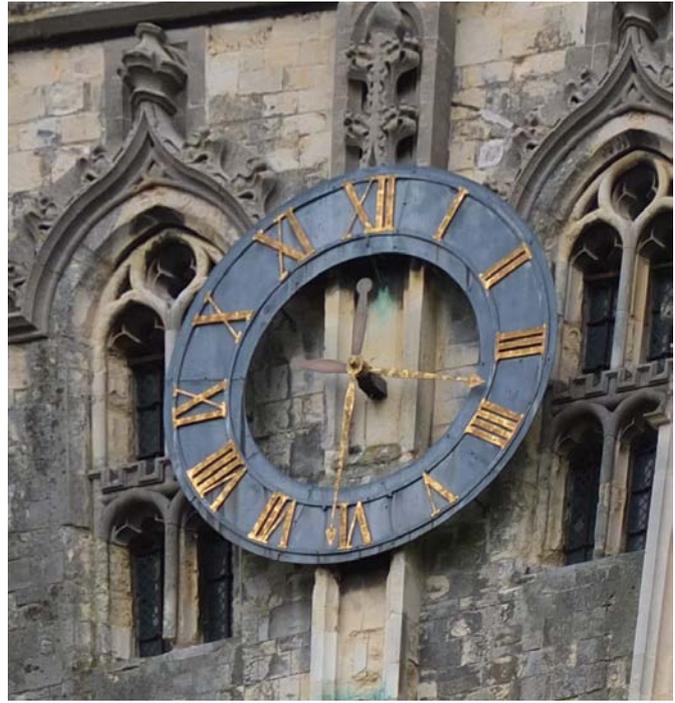
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Trimnell clocks offered at recent auctions

Every now and then auction catalogues include an example of a Victorian clock marked 'W & H Trimnell Canterbury'. Such items were made by father and son local jewellers William Henry Trimnell (1809-1868) and Henry George Trimnell (1842-1876)¹. They worked at shops in Mercery Lane and in The Parade. William was active in most aspects of city life (Conservative councillor, Poor Law Guardian, churchwarden at St Andrews, Commissioner of Pavements, amateur theatricals, and President of the Catch Club (a popular singing club). His son Henry became a volunteer member of the city fire brigade.

¹ genealogical dates from Ancestry.com



Trimnell's clock above the south west porch²

In 1855, when Henry was still in his early teens, his father won the contract for replacement of the cathedral clock³ - high above the entrance at the south west porch⁴. The new clock was massive. It weighed two tons, with a pendulum ball which itself weighed 460 lb. It rang the hours and the quarters, sounds that had not been heard for many years. The clock face had a diameter of 8 ft. William had made his personal mark on the cathedral, and it stands to this day as an impressive memorial - he died age just 58 in 1868.



²

³ referred to as 'a clock by Vale' in Chronicle April 1961 - it seems plausible that Trimnell purchased the basic clock workings

⁴ Times Digital Archives 5 December 1855

Henry's chance for stardom came in September 1872, when plumbers repairing the roof above the Trinity chapel managed to upset a pot of hot lead which set fire to the roof timbers⁶. By the time the city fire brigade arrived, the timbers were alight, the weather vane had fallen, and the Black Prince's tomb was threatened with falling sparks and



city fire brigade after the fire⁷

molten lead. The joint fire-fighting resources of workmen on the roof amounted to a single bucket of water, which unsurprisingly had made no impression on the blaze. What followed had touches of both Dad's Army and Monty Python. The mains water supply for the city had been greatly improved three years earlier, with an increased water pressure that enabled firemen to reach the tops of most buildings in the city⁸. But the Dean and Chapter had not arranged for the new supply to enter the precincts. The city brigade had hoses but they would not reach the Buttermarket hydrant. In any case, no one was sure who had the hydrant key. By the time hoses had been

⁵ Reproduced courtesy of the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury - CCA-Photo/352/2 - this image represents one of several marginal images on the scroll - see also footnote 9 below

⁶ mentioned in Audrey Bateman's *Victorian Canterbury* (Barracuda Books, 1991) p101

⁷ Reproduced courtesy of the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury - CCA-Photo/352/1 - it is tempting to try to deduce which of the fire crew is Henry Trimnell; the two without beards are strong candidates but we do not quite have enough details

⁸ see CHAS website for details of Wincheap Water Works built 1869 - <http://www.canterbury-archaeology.org.uk/>

connected from the Kent fire brigade, the Garrison fire engine, and the Phoenix and Kent Fire Offices, the fire was well established. The day (indeed the cathedral) was saved by the bravery of the 8 man crew of the city brigade⁹. A few days later, Captain Pidduck received an illustrated scroll thanking him and his crew for their sterling efforts. The names at the foot of the scroll include that of Henry George Trimnell¹⁰.

Four years' later, Dean and Chapter invited Henry to make arrangements for routine cleaning of the clock mechanism installed by his father 21 years before. The work was carried out over several days by a small team consisting of Henry, Stephen Arman¹¹ who worked for the Dean and Chapter, and a 'competent workman' brought from London. To access the clock workings the team took steps up to a corridor leading the ringing chamber, and then further steps up to the enclosed space behind the clock. The main cleaning fluid was Benzoline, a form of petroleum spirit that gives off vapour and is volatile and inflammable. Contrary to cathedral instructions, to see better what they were doing, they introduced a small oil lamp and some matches. The result was loud explosion that left Henry badly burned. Despite close medical attention from Dr Wachter, his brother-in-law¹², he died at home several days later. The body was taken to the Fleece Inn (just across The Parade) for the coroner's hearing. No one emerged from this unscathed¹³: the Dean¹⁴ and Chapter could have provided more senior guidance and control (particularly given the fiasco of the 1872 fire); Arman knew of the rules on open flames but felt he should leave this to Trimnell; and it was Trimnell's oil lamp that had led to the explosion. The burial took place at St Dunstan's. Henry was 34 years old and unmarried.



formerly Fleece Inn in The Parade¹⁵



burial place of Henry George Trimnell

⁹ Canterbury Journal 7 September 1872

¹⁰ the scroll gives several interesting marginal line drawings, including depictions of the County Fire Offices in Canterbury, the city fire brigade, Captain Pidduck, and 2nd Lieut. de Lascaux

¹¹ spelling varies between newspaper reports *Arman* or *Adman* - *Arman* appears in reports of the inquest

¹² Mary Ann Trimnell (1846-1938), younger sister of Henry George, married Frank Wachter, Canterbury doctor

¹³ Times Digital Archives 3 and 15 June 1876; Whitstable Times 17 and 24 June 1876

¹⁴ Dean Payne-Smith wrote twice to the Times (12 June 1876) to complain about 'exaggerated statements' in their leading article, and again (15 June 1876) to explain why mains water was not routinely available in the precincts; he did acknowledge that 'no special reminder was given to him *ie Henry Trimnell* of the order not to have a light'

¹⁵ a property that survived German air raids in World War 2 whilst those either side were demolished

(used for the inquest)

(extreme left of the foreground graves)¹⁶

The time kept by this clock was known as Canterbury Mean Time. This was justified on the grounds that the clock tower stands on a meridian lying 1 degree 5 seconds east of Greenwich, so its true time should be just over 4 minutes in advance of Greenwich Time¹⁷. With the coming of railways, other towns and cities one by one changed their local time to that of Greenwich - but not so Canterbury. Help meanwhile was at hand in St Peter's Street where the watchmaker Mr Smith placed a dial in his window showing both local and Greenwich times. Only in 1921 was the cathedral clock brought in line with Greenwich time¹⁸.

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¹⁶ sandstone ledgerstone with railings (now lost) 'Also July 10th 1876 Henry George Trimnell second son of the above age 34 years, *Judge not the Lord by feeble sense but trust Him for His grace Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face*' - retrieved from grave transcription available in Beaney Reference Library - no longer legible in situ

¹⁷ Canterbury Journal 17 April 1847

¹⁸ Chronicle April 1961 p 17